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Local News

Shedding some light

By Donna Littlejohn

DAILY BREEZE

For a few shining moments this week, San Pedro saw the light.

Well, make that parts of San Pedro. And a little bit of light.

Despite the minuscule size of Wednesday night's lighting experiment — barely more than two pinpricks of blue shone forth from the Vincent Thomas Bridge roadway — it was a welcome sight to frustrated and weary residents who have labored nearly 15 years to put decorative lights on San Pedro's most prominent landmark.

"It's going to happen," said Louis Dominguez, chairman of the Vincent Thomas Bridge Lighting Committee.

"At first I thought, where is it? Where is it? Then I finally saw it," said Zorka Rengel, 83, who spotted the lights from her residence at the Little Sisters of the Poor in San Pedro.

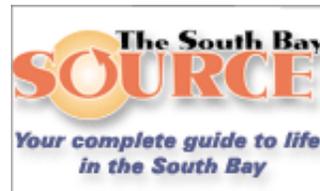
Rengel is one of dozens of residents who purchased a bridge light for \$100 years ago as part of a fund-raiser for the project. She bought the light in memory of her husband, Stephen, a longshoreman and commercial fisherman who died in 1990.

If the project is approved, the tiny blue lights would outline the mile-long bridge, swooping along the draped cables and running across the bottom of the roadway. Whether lights — perhaps in a contrasting color like white — will be installed also on the tall vertical bridge towers is still up for debate.

Wednesday's hourlong illumination was just a trial run sponsored by engineers at Lighting Design Alliance and Ledtronics Inc. in Torrance to test which lenses would be more effective and whether the low-energy LED lights would be visible from different parts of town.

Reports of sightings were generally good, although calls from some residents indicated the two sample lights weren't seen everywhere.

"I put my binoculars on and I picked out two lights on



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(Terminal) Island,” said Sam Jabuka, a retired harbor pilot who has a clear view of the bridge from his home on Palos Verdes Drive East in Rancho Palos Verdes.

But what did he see of the bridge lights?

“Nothing,” he said. “They’re going to have to do something better than that.”

Even so, officials came away in general agreement: With the number of lights multiplied more than a hundredfold and strung high along the cables, it’ll work.

The plan still needs state approval. And the installation cost is a big question.

But after more than a decade of failed attempts, supporters say they expect to receive the green light this time around for the new, environmentally sensitive proposal to outline in blue lights the span built in 1963 to connect San Pedro to Terminal Island.

Engineers now will work on coming up with a specific design proposal in hopes of lighting up the entire bridge by September, when a tall ships festival is coming to San Pedro.

Since it was launched in the 1980s, the drive to illuminate the Vincent Thomas Bridge has seen numerous setbacks, including the state’s energy crisis and opposition from environmentalists.

Environmentalists this week remained cautious, but said the new LED plan is a big improvement over earlier proposals using four 7,000-watt Xenon Skytracker beams that many believe would threaten migrating birds and add to light pollution.

“We’re light-years away from where we started,” said Travis Longcore, science director for the Los Angeles-based Urban Wildlands Group.

Longcore was among about 15 people — including Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn — who gathered Wednesday night on the roof of the 10-story Sheraton Hotel in downtown San Pedro to watch the trial lighting.

As the lights were turned and lenses changed, engineers asked those on the roof to tell them which looked better, the left one or the right one.

“I feel like I’m at my (eye) doctor’s office,” Hahn said.

Using her cell phone, Hahn called her mother across town to get her opinion.

“Are you looking out your window? Do you see the two blue lights?” Hahn said. “Do you think the left one or the right one is better?”

The right one, Hahn’s mom agreed.

Spotters stationed at Angels Gate Park, at the opposite end of town, said they saw the bridge lights. So did some residents in Rancho Palos Verdes, though others in the Eastview area said they couldn’t see them.

“You could see them if you really stared at the area,” said Shawn Tuflija, who saw the lights through binoculars from his two-story house near Alma and 20th streets.

“The Vincent Thomas Bridge is the gateway to the harbor,” he said. “It’s like the Golden Gate Bridge going into San Francisco

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and if there was something to bring attention to it, like the lights, it would just give us some style.”

Experts say a full bridge lighting with 120 panels of LEDs — light-emitting diodes that run on solar energy — would make the bridge lights visible from most all points in San Pedro and Wilmington.

Compact LEDs radiate a very small but brilliant light and are being increasingly used for traffic signals, computer displays and control panels.

While costing more to purchase than incandescent lights, LEDs use only a fraction of the power regular light bulbs do, making them more cost-effective. The lights can last tens of thousands of hours and are impervious to heat, cold, shock and vibration.

The color blue was chosen for the bridge project because of its ability to stand out amid the many amber-colored lights in the Los Angeles Harbor.

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